



A MYTHIC LIFE

CHAPTER EIGHT SCHOOLING GODSEEDS

It is April 14, 2020, and I am visiting an elementary school in Ames, Iowa. I am known as Granny Jean. As I approach the schools grounds, I am astonished at the variety of buildings that comprise the learning centers--simple huts made of mud and wattles, an Indian teepee, a large geodesic dome, a walk-in space station, even a pennant-flying medieval Guild Hall. A group of children are busy building a log cabin, while others are spraying liquid cement into fanciful shapes for a new kind of building. All of these structures are set amidst trees and meadows.

In the near distance I see a soccer game in progress, but turn when I hear someone call out, "Embrace tiger, go to mountain." It is a class in Tai Chi, and I marvel at the delicate but controlled poetry in the children's movements. I move towards the Guild Hall and prepare to enter, thinking that this is the administration building, but when I reach the door, I bump into into nothingness. The seemingly ancient structure is a hologram.

I hear giggling behind me and turn to be met by my hosts--two children, around ten years old, one of whom is in a motorized wheel chair that he appears to run by thinking the direction he wants to go. They introduce themselves as Tony and Lakshmi.

"We fooled you, didn't we, Granny Jean," says Tony, as he moves his chair closer to me. "That's my science project--creating holograms of buildings and placing them around the meadow."

"And what's your science project, a dinosaur theme park?" I ask the girl, thinking back to a movie I enjoyed in my salad days.

"Oh no, I'm doing an integrated study of fifteenth-century Florence, the time of the Renaissance. I'm trying to understand how it happened, why it happened, as well as looking into the work of Michaelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. I'm learning Italian, taking a course in sculpting, getting the math I need to measure the Duomo and compare it with Calvary Lutheran, and cooking green bread and weird stews like they ate back then."

"And how do you like your study, Lakshmi?"

"Great, it's real raga, you griff my high?"

I remind myself that I must find the time to catch up on young people's vernacular."Watch out for the Satori Hole," she cautions, as she steers me around a sudden cavelike opening in the ground, where I later learn that children crawl in to meditate, or just enjoy some solitude.

"Let's take her to see the little kids first," says Tony, as he points his chair in the direction of the learning center for younger children.

"This is a wonderful school, Granny Jean," Lakshmi tells me as we follow Tony, "because everyone here is special."

"Do you mean that the children here have special talents or special problems?"

"Oh no, nothing like that, although we have every kind of kid here. No, it's just that we all treat

each other as having all kinds of wonderful possibilities. We're all marvelous, and we're all different. In a million years there's never been anyone like me or Tony."

"It sure wasn't like that in my day," I mutter as I catch up with Tony.

He joins the conversation, "My Mom tells me that long, long ago, like when you went to school, someone like me with cerebral palsy would have to go to a school for handicapped children. We still have some schools like that, but here I'm just a special case of being normal. Here are the little kids."

We enter into a room that is a riot of color, shapes, music and even smells--a child's garden of the senses. I feel that I have passed through the looking glass into Alice's world, for dancing around the room are young children, each of whom is carrying a large plastic letter that is almost as big as the child carrying it. Each child is making the sound of their letter--"Ah-ah-ah ah! B-b-b-b-! M-m-m-m-! Ca-ca-ca-ca!"

The teacher is pounding away at the piano and calling out words to spell. "Let's put together a HAT!" Immediately there is a mad scramble as the H, the A, and the T find each other and arrange themselves to form the word. The teacher notices us and, without missing a beat, signals Lakshmi to take over. Lakshmi starts to play and calls out "SNAKE!"

The teacher, a tall black woman comes laughing towards me. "We have a saying around here. If you want to hold it in your head, you'd better hold it in your hands. I'm Jenny Jefferson. I'm glad to meet you."

"Does that mean that the children touch everything that they are learning about, Jenny?"

"Everything, as well as running it through the other senses as well--all two hundred of them." She leads me over to a table where three children are conducting a math experiment, figuring out how to divide an apple into three equal parts. In the process they are sniffing, biting, cutting, and measuring apples--and discovering fractions. Apple juice streams from their mouths; apple pieces are strewn all over the table.

A small child comes up chewing away on her fruit. "Ms. Jefferson," she says, "why does a third have to be less than a half?"

"What a wonderful question, Barbie," Jenny says as she goes over to the table and cuts an apple in half. "Now you tell me this. Can this half of an apple be more than this whole apple?"

Suddenly, in Barbie's eyes is that perpetual miracle so small and yet the essence of all discovery, "Oh, I see. . ."

Just then the door opens and a bevy of children, all about eight years old come running in. I notice that each is carrying a little book."Story time," one of them yells, and the first grade comes bounding up to meet them. Soon each of the older children is reading from a book to several of the younger ones. "What's going on here?" I ask Tony.

"Oh that's the third grade reading the books they wrote to the first grade. You get to write and illustrate your own stories and then the computer helps you publish them. But you've also got to learn book binding at the art center. That way you have your own hardcover book. And when you read it to the little kids, it gets them interested in writing. Neat, huh?"

"Very neat," I say as I draw near to one third grader who is explaining her book to several younger children. The cover seems to be a drawing of old-fashioned farmers. "See, my mom and I found

an old graveyard from the 1800's near where we live. So I did some research on the families who were buried there, and I made up a story about their lives."

"Read it. Read it," the children press her.

"Ok, here goes," she says and turns to the first page. "It was a dark and stormy night. . . ." The kids nestle in closer.

Before I was twelve years old, I must have attended close to twenty schools. From Brooklyn to Pismo Beach, from Teaneck to Tarzana, I hit every kind of school system that America in the forties and early fifties had to offer. In the course of a year, I might have moved from the friendly drone of a one-room schoolhouse to the lock-lipped terror of a "religious" school, to the rowdy exuberance of a "progressive" institution (where you never learned to read but the finger painting was great), to Miss Prigg's bluestocking establishment for young Wasps, to a school for army brats where the war in the classroom sometimes matched anything the Daddies were up to.

Needless to say, my real education took place on the train. My mother believed in the classical dictum that the mind's muscles are built up through memorization, and that the great intellects of the past owed their gifts to the reams of saga and scripture they committed to memory while they were children.

"Jeanie," she said to me one day shortly after my third birthday. "We're going to put biceps on your cortex. Now repeat after me, 'To be or not to be. . .'"

"Be not be. BUZZZZZZZZZZ. Look, Mommy, I'm a bee. BUZZZZZZZZ. I'm gonna sting you."

"That is the question," my mother persisted.

"What is the question, Mommy?"

My father often interrupted these sessions by encouraging me to memorize--not the immortal lines of the Bard, but a slew of original efforts he and I composed together. One unforgettable ditty, made up, I believe, somewhere between Pittsburgh and Terre Haute, ran as follows:

I have a funny Daddy who walks here and there with me,
And everywhere that Daddy goes, there Jeanie's sure to be,
And everything that Daddy says, that Jeanie's sure to tell,
You may have heard my Daddy's jokes; I hope he fries in hell!

Fortunately, my mother insisted on having me commit to memory passages of somewhat higher literary quality. By the time I was ten, I had been made to learn by heart whole scenes from Shakespeare's plays, sheafs of poems, mostly of a style that could only be described as nineteenth-century heroic, great chunks of Dante's Divine Comedy, and (from my father) all sixty-seven stanzas of "The Face on the Barroom Floor." We also sang great deal of Italian opera together, especially the arias of Verdi and Puccini. The rest of my education went apace. I was always on a collision course with history, and geography was something that sped by at 80 miles an hour.

"Jeanie, quick, look out the window. There goes the Continental Divide, and it was there that Chief

Stony Foot captured the traveling minstrel show and put them to work tanning buffalo hides.”

Learning to read and write was a unique experience. My father sat me down next to a radio, turned on some comedy show and ordered, “If you hear anything funny, write it down.”

“I don’t know what’s funny,” I whined.

“What do you mean, you don’t know what’s funny? You’re my daughter, so by God you better know what’s funny!”

So by age five I was stealing jokes for my father, which he would rewrite and present on another show.

Between train trips, I actually went to school. Dad insisted that I enroll wherever we stopped for more than several weeks. He thought that the experience would be good for me, even though we rarely stayed in any one place long enough for me to learn much. This was a source of constant contention between my parents.

“School isn’t for learning,” I heard my father tell my mother one day. “Heck, Mary, you can teach Jeanie more than any fool school marm can. No, if Jeanie goes to school, it’s for an entirely different reason. School is for politics.”

“But, Jack, the poor child never has time to have any period of adjustment.”

“You’re right, Mary. So the only way for her to avoid the problem of adjustment is to take over! If she gets to be president of the class every time she changes schools, then she won’t run into any of the ornery treatment that the new kid generally gets.”

With my father as my campaign manager, the technique of “taking over” soon was gotten down to a science. The campaign was launched immediately upon moving to a new town. “Jeanie,” my father might say as we carried our belongings into a newly rented house. “Tomorrow morning you get enrolled in the fourth grade at the Riverside-Van Nuys Elementary School. Start thinking about what you can do to begin Phase One.”

“Phase One--get them interested,” I repeated to myself. “I know, Daddy. I’ll start with my rodeo rope tricks. They went over great in that school in Biloxi, Mississippi.”

The next day I was introduced to class 4B by the teacher Miss Rosenbloom. I heard a titter from the front rows and instantly spotted my enemies. They were the same all over the country. Wherever I went, they wore the same tight ribbons and shiny patent leather shoes. They had clean fingernails, wore a ring with a semiprecious stone, and had names like Roxanne, Jeanette, Paula, and Lillian. They were the elite girls in the class, the social butterflies, the stuck-ups, the Nasties. They knew how to create a magic circle of power and prestige and ruled supreme in determining who was in and who was out. I knew them, and by their smirk, I knew that they knew me.

I cast my practiced eye around the room in search of my buddies. There they were--the dreamers and the tricksters, scratching their necks and shuffling their feet, ready for anything or anybody that could show them something different to be or do. And there, in the last row, with no one sitting near him, was my special friend, the class outcast. Whether he was the poorest kid in school or the class weirdo, he was almost always my best friend. He was generally more interesting than the rest of the kids, and what’s more, both my parents seemed to like him best. If I sensed I was in for a landslide, I generally tried to bring him in as vice president.

As the teacher drilled us through arithmetic and spelling, I noted that Class 4B that day was at a level that my mother called “California so-so.” This contrasted with “Southern slow,” and “New York speedy,” the level she tried to keep me at. Since I had had so many different teachers, I had set up my own categories as to their style. Miss Rosenbloom was a “sleeper.” There were also “screamers,” “shamers,” “stand-over-ers,” (they hovered over your desk while you wrote) and “spitters” (they’re the ones who got so mad at the class that they sprayed the front row when they yelled). Of course there were nice ones too--the ones who tried to invent interesting ways to help you learn new subjects. I thought about Miss Murray, who had us make up our own songs as part of music appreciation; of Mr. Horowitz who taught mathematics and shop and joined the two together to teach us basic geometry while we made tables; and of course, my Dad, who had us inventing new machines with odds and ends we found around the neighborhood or at the city dump.

As Miss Rosenbloom droned on, I looked around the room and noticed that about half the class had died. “Pay attention, children,” she admonished. “Otherwise, you won’t be able to pass the test.” Oh oh, I thought, she’s one of those who teach for the test. I won’t be learning much here. Years later, I understood that it was in classes like these that people started the long decline into psyche-sclerosis of the mind. At least Miss Rosenbloom and her ilk taught me what not to do with a child’s mind!

I am sorry to say that little has changed in the wasteland of teachers lecturing out of textbooks and bored children responding to directives in workbooks. And although the state of the art in educating the child’s whole mind and body is presently quite high, the application of these findings, except in special schools and cases, is shockingly low. In fact, of the 13,000 hours spent in school from kindergarten through high schools, something like 75 percent of all classroom instruction is still centered around textbooks and has little to do with life as She is lived! Policy makers fear real-life experience and absolve themselves by loading on more course work and longer school hours and by cutting out art and music as well as other glories that speak to the beauty of the mind and spirit. No wonder the National Commission on Excellence in Education has said, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”

Occasionally Miss Rosenbloom would break the tedium by asking a question, and always the same kids held up their hands to answer. The Nasties, especially, seemed to have the corner on the waving hands in the air market. “I know, teacher. I know. I know!”

Finally, recess came, and as the children bounded out to freedom, I sought out the outcast and asked him his name.

“Coo Coo, Coo Coo, Coo Coo!” he screamed at me in a frenzied imitation of a cuckoo clock bird. “Coo Coo Fanny. That’s my name.”

“Yes, but what’s your real name, the name your Mom and Dad gave you, not the name that the kids gave you?” As a veteran observer and boon companion of crazy kids, I was in familiar territory here.

“Charles Longbotham,” he replied, somewhat more soberly, “but everybody’s called me Coo Coo since second grade.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Cause they say I’m crazy.”

“Are you?”

He nodded.

“How?”

“Well, they tell me that every so often I jump out of my seat, get stiff as a board, spin around a couple of times, and then pass out. When I come to, I predict things, like which team is going to win the baseball game or that the principal is going to break her leg, which she did. I never remember afterwards what I said, and that’s why they call me Coo Coo.”

“Listen, Longbotham,” I replied, “A prophet is never without honor except in his own country. That’s the way it was with Jesus, and that’s the way it is with you. You’re not cuckoo; you’re wonderful! You have a great talent. I tell you what, you stick with me, and we’ll take over the class.”

Obviously, I realized even back then what I tell my students today--that many people labeled “crazy” by contemporary standards are, in essence, creative or spiritual geniuses. Think of what many formally trained psychologists would make of the curious practices and visionary knowings of a Teresa of Avila, a Saint Francis of Assisi, an Emily Dickinson. I seriously doubt whether any of them would have gotten through to their teens without being put on some tranquilizer or psychoactive drug. We do such great originals a disservice by labeling them as pathological. When we see them in their fullness--mythologize, rather than pathologize their visions and special gifts--we enrich ourselves and bring evolutionary insights into the world.

With my new friend in tow, whose genius I, for one, could recognize, I took my lariat and went out to the playground. I strolled over to the dead center of the schoolyard and began spinning the lariat over my head. Soon kids were beginning to notice and to gather around, except the Nasties who stood clustered together and giggling over by the fence.

“Hey. . .what’s your name?” called out one of the members of the admiring circle which now surrounded me.

“Jean.”

“Hey, Jean, do you know how to lasso things with that rope?”

“Sure,” I replied. “What do you want me to lasso?” I looked around for a post or something, but my eyes landed on the Nasties still bunched over by the fence pretending I didn’t exist. Then it dawned on me. Here was a perfect opportunity to launch Phase Two of my dad’s carefully worked out plan of conquest--Turn the World Upside Down. This meant bring the people who were at the bottom up to the top, and take the people who were at the top and let them enjoy a little humility, for a change, and generally, shake up all the usual habits and expectations. I moved closer to the fence and let fly with my rope. Soon many hands were helping me haul a gaggle of furious girls toward the center of the playground. Though I knew I would pay for my triumph, I had won the first round.

“Boy, are we going to get back at you,” said Lillian, the leader of the Nasties. “We’re going to tell the teacher and have you put in the class for special problems.”

“No you’re not,” I replied pleasantly, “because if you do, I’m not going to invite you to the best and most fun party you’ll ever go to in your life which I am having next week. I am inviting the whole class. We’re going to play the game that everybody is playing in New York City. It’s called Juby Juby

Ding Ding, and I'm the only kid in California who knows the rules." Actually, the only place this game existed was in my head. If I had been in New York City, I would have said that this was the game that everybody in Hollywood was playing and that I was the only kid in New York who knew the rules. But Lillian was hooked, and she knew it.

As we trailed back to the classroom, I noticed Coo Coo struggling along by himself. "Would you like to carry the lariat, Longbotham?" I called out to him.

His face lit up, and he came running over. "Sure, thanks," he said and carefully took the rope from me.

"His name isn't Longbotham," a little girl named Gigi Getz advised me. "It's Fanny--Coo Coo Fanny."

I could see Longbotham's face fall. "No, it's not," I retorted. "It's Long-both-am, Charles Longbotham, and anyone who calls him Coo Coo Fanny can't come to my party. And you shouldn't be mean to him, cause he's special. He's a prophet just like Jesus."

"I'm Jewish," said Gigi. "I don't believe in Jesus."

"Well, like Moses, then. Come on, Longbotham, predict something."

Longbotham sucked in his breath, shut his eyes very tight, hammered on his head with his fist, and said, "I predict that Lillian and her friends are going to try to get you into lots of trouble. And I predict that we're going to have lots of fun."

Longbotham proved to be a true prophet. During the rest of the week, the Nasties tried their hardest to humiliate me. Later that week, I asked Miss Rosenbloom for a monitor's job, hoping that I'd be made blackboard monitor, which would have given me opportunities to show off how high up the board I could reach and how much chalk dust I could make rise and to perform other feats calculated to arouse voter interest.

Unfortunately, Roxanne, one of the chief Nasties, was the keeper of the class assignment sheet. Still smarting from being hog-tied on the playground, Roxanne smiled sweetly and offered me the post of bathroom monitor. Her suggestion was greeted by hoots of laughter from my classmates. My dilemma was clear. If I accepted the job of bathroom monitor, I would not only have to give up part of my lunch period three times a week to guard the bathroom, but I would sink to the level of class leper--somewhat on a par with Longbotham. But to refuse would have been a greater humiliation--to admit defeat and to sink into classroom anonymity. Then I remembered my father's sage political advice, "It's OK to let yourself appear at first to be the underdog. That way everybody has sympathy for you. It's the old Log Cabin to the White House routine." With that in mind, I accepted the appointment.

On the having fun side, I also scored a few victories, such as the great Show-and-Tell caper. Show-and-Tell time was my personal province. I used to think it was invented just for me. It was the bedrock of my political strategy and afforded me many hours of free publicity. On the day of Show-and-Tell, I wore my trick sleeves to class, intending to demonstrate my prowess at sleight-of-hand, another educational "must" my father imposed on me. "How can you possibly have a successful life and not know magic tricks?" he reasoned sagely. When my turn came, I got up and said, "Today I'd like to show everybody a mysterious magical marvel that I learned from a wise old Indian chief. What I do is say some powerful magical words over somebody and then I pull out of his head his secret nature. That's

right. I pull out something that tells what you're really like. Now, who wants to go first?"

Every hand in the class shot up, except for the Nasties. I called on the class baseball nut first. "OK, Donald, you come up and sit down right here in front of me." I waved my arms over his head intoning, "Abra Cadabra, Capilly Capike. Tell us what Donald really is like!" Then I reached into Donald's ear and pulled out a miniature baseball and bat, purchased the day before at the Five and Dime. "That's you, Donald," I said, handing him his "secret nature." Needless to say, Donald was delighted.

"Who's next?" I asked and chose Longbotham out of the sea of waving arms. He sat down in front of me and I chanted, "Azarec, Pazarec, Moxi Pan-dessence. Tell us the nature of Longbotham's essence!" I gave my sleeve a shake, and suddenly about fifty gold stars, the kind you get for good marks, appeared in Longbotham's hair. "Congratulations, Longbotham. You're made of gold stars."

A beaming and bemused Longbotham went happily back to his seat picking stars out of his hair.

"OK, let's have a girl now. How about you, Lillian?"

"Yeah, Lillian. Go ahead. Go find out what you're really like."

Lillian got to her feet reluctantly. "I know what I'm really like," she whispered to me with the knowing smirk of one professional to another as she sat down in front of me. "And you're going to need about a thousand gold stars."

"We'll see," I said. "The magic never lies." Waving my arms in my most impressive manner, I chanted, "Gezzam and Gozzam and Ho Hum and Diz. Tell us who Lillian actually is." I reached down into her hair and, with a jerk, produced a horrible shrunken head from the Amazon, which I had demanded and gotten for a Christmas present. "Here's Lillian's secret nature!" I hooted, and pandemonium broke out.

Lillian ran screaming to the back of the room with me hot behind her, swinging the shrunken head by the hair. The head must have really had some magical properties because the classroom reverted to a kind of primitive chaos. Kids fell into wild, convulsive laughter, more than a few wet their pants, and the head was sent whizzing through the air from hand to hand. All this was climaxed by Longbotham's spinning like a top, keeling over, and then sitting up to chirp, "President Coo Coo, President Coo Coo."

After that episode, Miss Rosenbloom barred from me from Show-and-Tell forever, but that, of course, has never stopped me. In my seminars and workshops, I am always using stunts to help my students get in touch with their Essence--each person's deeper truth and Larger Story. We wear costumes and masks, gift each other and dance our dreams, spin like dervishes, dissolve into laughter, and create a magnum of mayhem--all in the service of discovering our "secret nature"--the godseed hidden in each of us. Orchestrating all of this as chief show-off and impresario has, I guess, always been part of my Essence, even in the fourth grade.

Lillian, of course, retaliated as soon as possible for my Show-and-Tell triumph. On the day my party, which the kids had begun to call the "world's greatest party," I showed up ten minutes late for bathroom monitor duty because I had been trying out some of my father's better jokes with the lunchroom crowd. When I pushed open the swinging door, I discovered that the bathroom had been

sabotaged! The cubicles were festooned with streamers of toilet paper, water was cascaded to the floor from sinks that had been stoppering and left with the faucets running full blast, and the toilets were packed with wads of paper towels. And to underscore this debauchery, someone had even scribbled on the mirror in lipstick, "WHERE IS THE BATHROOM MONITOR?" For my dereliction of duty, Miss Rosenbloom made me stay after school to write something salubrious to benefit my character one hundred times on the blackboard: "I will always be on time at the bathroom."

When I finally got home, my party was in full swing. My father, who had been voted the most popular boy in the class when I was in third grade, had scarcely noticed my absence. As usual, he had completely taken over and, by now, held my classmates completely in thrall. As I went through the front gate, a strange apparition bounded past me in a gorilla mask and an orange fright wig and wearing huge clown feet ending in bright red toenails. He was followed by a boisterous, yelping stampede of my classmates. Every so often, my father would stop in his tracks, scratch himself monkey style, and burst into a torrent of gibbering. The kids quickly caught on and began pelting him and each other with bananas and peanuts that had been artfully strewn about the lawn earlier in the day.

As the merriment reached epic proportions, and my Dad clambered up a tree to recover Gigi Getz's Star of David that had somehow ended dangling from a branch, the Nasties arrived.

"Who is that?" Roxanne asked.

"My father," I replied apologetically. "He's King Kong."

As with one mind, one voice, one collective sentiment, the Nasties began to sing-song, "Jean has got a monkey for a faaaa-ther! Jean has got a monkey for a faaaa-ther!"

I plucked at my father's sleeve. "Daddy, please take off your mask. You'll ruin everything." With a great deal of reluctance, my father complied. I knew I had to do something quickly to take back control of my party. After all, I was the one running for class president, and for once in my political career, I wanted the kids to vote for me, not for my father.

"What are going to do now?" Gigi asked me.

"I've got a great idea," I said brightly, playing Lady Bountiful. "I'll make everybody ice cream sodas."

"Oh, no!" my Dad objected. "These kids don't want to have ordinary ice cream sodas. What these kids want to do is play Sodas and Ladders. Who wants to play Sodas and Ladders?"

"Me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me!" came a chorus of replies.

My heart sank. Sodas and Ladders was a messy little game of skill which my father had used many times with contestants on his stunt shows. Each boy is stretched out on his back with a large paper cup taped to his forehead. Each girl stands on a step-ladder and tries to make an ice cream soda by dropping scoops of ice cream, chocolate syrup, ginger ale, whipped cream, and a cherry into the cup below. The first pair to complete an ice cream soda is the winner.

Kids being kids, the point of the game soon changed to a contest of decorative skills. Roxanne had Coo Coo looking like an early Picasso, and Robert, under Gigi's ministrations, took on the appearance of a banana-split psychosis by Van Gogh. The boys were lapping it up, however, and Chickie, my dog happily slurped away on pistachio ice cream noses, whipped cream ties, and chocolate shirts, complete with cherry buttons.

Amidst the mess, a strange kind of frenzy gripped the students in class 4B. There were no more clean clothes. There were also no more inhibitions. The games got wilder and wilder and faster and faster. Dad would no sooner finish one game than he would launch another. He convinced the fattest boy in class to allow a board studded with tacks to be strapped to his broad posterior. Paula, one of the Nasties was chosen to be "It." She was sent out of the room while the kids agreed to concentrate on one of an unlikely collection of objects my father had took out of a closet for the occasion, including, among others, a jar of pig's feet, a trombone, a container of chicken fat, and the umbrella "used by a dear old lady to beat the living tar out of the only man who had ever kicked Lassie." When Paula returned, she moved toward each of the items in turn, guided by cries of "Hot!" and "Cold!" from the class. On each cry of "Cold," Paula was to spank Tubby with a net full of balloons. The game continued until she guessed correctly or all the balloons were popped.

Perhaps the more jaded of my readers might think that my father was skirting perilously close to the shade of the Marquis de Sade in these games of his--but I beg to differ. My father was the original innocent; moreover, he understood the kid mind. As the founder and chief gamester of the Mystery School, which I often describe cheerfully as the longest-running adult kindergarten, perhaps I can be forgiven my own excesses in the High Play and merriment department. As the reader can see, I was fostered and trained by the best in the business.

Of course, the game of "Hot and Cold" deteriorated as well. Soon balloons glistening with chicken fat were sailing through the air like a greasy armada, and the kids were taking turns playing golf with the pigs' feet. In a last attempt to turn the tide of attention toward myself, I cried, "Let's play Juby Juby Ding Ding." But my suggestion fell on deaf ears, as the the mad-eyed throng flowed like lava after my father.

My father was a shoo-in for president. I had to stop the party. But how? At this point only some extreme and drastic measure could command their attention. But what? A line of poetry kept humming through my head, "The boy stood on the burning deck . . ." What did that mean? Then it dawned on me--the burning rope trick. Of course, I'd never done the trick before, but there had to be a first time. I went off to the garage to find the fire-making materials. A few minutes later, I was back on the lawn setting a match to my gasoline-soaked lariat.

Nobody noticed as it caught fire. Class 4B was reeling and squealing mindlessly--somewhere in the last stages of the St. Vitus Dance.

"Hi Ho Silver," I sang out and spun the burning rope sideways so I could jump through it. I sprang with my Mary Jane shoes and passed through the circle of flame.

"Show-off! Show-off! Show-off!" The Nasties had noticed me.

"Hey, look at Jean." So had everybody else.

I leaped again and again, back and forth through the spinning fire. It was a perfect moment. I could do no wrong. The rope and I were joined in some mystic fiery circle of understanding. The fourth grade was standing around me, open-mouthed in wonder. The Nasties were prickling with jealousy.

Vaguely in the background, I was aware of a note of dissonance. My father had at last noticed what I was up to. He lunged for me, but at that moment I raised the rope in a circle over my head and took off across the lawn. Little shreds of burning rope began dropping around me, and something nearby

began to smell suspiciously like smoking chicken fat. It was my pinafore. The kids kept a respectful distance, but one ventured a bit of advice.

“Hey, Jean, I think you’re on fire.”

“Show-off! Show-off! Sets herself on fire,” the Nasties chanted like a Greek chorus.

“The boy stood on the burning deck. . .” I intoned while slapping at my pinafore. Seeing my father hurtling toward me, I threw the rope behind me and made a flying leap under the house where I knew he couldn’t reach me.

“FIRE!” I heard somebody yell.

I wriggled out of my hiding place long enough to catch sight of the miracle of the burning bush, California-style. Evidently, my rope had landed on a dried-up banana tree, that was sitting on our lawn like a mummy looking for a hand out. I closed my eyes tight, stuck my fingers in my ears, and held my breath to the count of sixty, hoping it would all go away. About four of these breath holds later my walled off ear drums insisted on picking up the muffled clamor of a fire engine. A wet nose touched mine.

“Go ‘way, Chickie,” I said without opening my eyes to what I thought was my dog.

“I’m not Chickie. I’m Coo Coo. I thought you’d like this nice cold bottle of Nehi Orange.”

He thrust it into my face again.

“The cop is here,” he told me. “So’s the fire department. So are a lot of kids’ parents. It was the best party I ever went to,” he added respectfully.

In the days that followed, I rode the crest of popularity. My father had become a legend to the whole school, and I was honored as the living proof that he really existed. Even the big kids in the sixth grade buttered me up and asked if they could come over and meet my dad. Of course, we couldn’t have any more parties. My mother said that the insurance wouldn’t cover them, and anyway, our house had been declared off limits by any number of irate parents.

As if this wasn’t enough to insure my election, Coo Coo, who as my best friend, had also seen his status rise, sealed the victory. On the morning of the election, he spun around, got stiff as a board, fell down, and began to speak in a prophetic voice. To the amazement of the assembled voters, he announced, “God just told me that he wants Jean to be president of this here class!” How could anyone say no to that?

That afternoon, I was elected president of the class, with Coo Coo as my vice president. I held the post for exactly two days. Dad got a call to do a show in St. Louis, and we had to leave immediately. In my absence, Mr. Charles Longbotham became president of Class 4B.

Jenny, Lakshmi, and Tony take me into the geodesic dome. In the middle of the room is the art center, while many banks of computer terminals line the perimeter of the space. Children of every age are busy at keyboards and graphics interface terminals. Their skills seem professional, but of course they’ve grown up with computers and, for them, operating a computer is as normal as riding a bike.

Some children have their screens ablaze with multimedia projects; others are browsing the world’s libraries, while still others seem to be speaking with children in other countries. I notice a tiny television camera positioned on each screen. One boy tells me he is discussing a science project with

an Egyptian boy also in the fourth grade in Giza. They have been studying the effect of acid rain in their areas by measuring the pH levels of the soil and comparing their findings with other children on line around the world. Jenny whispers, “These kids are doing real research in tracking environmental pollution. Their findings will become part of an international data bank. That’s what we try to do here—make learning real and give the children opportunities to use more of themselves in authentic ways, creating knowledge that is of value to the world.”

“How right you are,” I reply. “What has always turned kids off was having to learn things that seemed to have no point.”

Lakshmi joins us, telling Jenny, “I led the class in their relaxation exercises and now the little kids are having their snooze.” She turns to peer at the screen of a girl who seems to be conducting a survey. “Hi, Amanda, how are you doing with ‘It Ought to Be a Law’?”

As the girls talk, Tony explains that proposed laws are sent to the children by legislators in the state house. The kids visit or talk on line talk to people in their neighborhoods about the legislation and give the lawmakers feedback about what their constituents think.

“Where is the teacher?” I ask Jenny.

She points to a young man wearing a tee-shirt plastered with fractal art. “He’s over there working on his own project. You see all those kids around him? He’s helping them find the information they need for their projects. You see, with information at every child’s fingertips, teachers are not the absolute holders of knowledge anymore. In fact, the kids you see here are learning to ask their own questions and then to find the answers. More often than not, they bring the curriculum to the teachers.”

“My teachers are my coaches,” Tony adds. “I bounce ideas off them.”

“My favorite teacher is like a guide in the jungle,” Lakshmi explains. “She knows a lot of paths to follow that she thinks I might like. And sometimes she lets me get lost so I can create my own paths.”

“What about tests?” I ask.

Jenny jumps in mock horror. “We don’t use that word around here. All those awful things ever did was measure recall on demand. And sensitive and creative children who thought in different ways too often felt themselves to be failures.”

I thought back to the one-right-answer, true-or-false tests of my school days, as Jenny continued. “We try to give children a sense of the many variations and nuances that are possible in any answer. We offer them the capacity for complexity.”

“How do you measure progress if there are no tests?”

“Through a much broader kind of assessment. Children keep portfolios and make videos of their projects. As you’ve seen, they do community projects as well and keep a record of those. They also keep records of their scientific and artistic experiments. The teachers review the portfolios so that they can follow each child’s ability to understand and apply what they are learning. Each child develops a personal electronic portfolio as well, a kind of file of everything they have written so that they can look back and compare their earlier writing with their present efforts. This way, each child is able to assess his or her own sequence of development.”

We have moved into the art center where children of all ages as well as a number of parents are busy making beauty and magic out of all sorts of materials. Looms, potters’ wheels, paints, clay, and

fabrics of all kinds are strewn in appropriate areas. The sounds emanating from this area are primal, happy ones--the slap of paint, the chip of stone, the rattling of the loom, the sloppy squish of god-only-knows-what. An old Japanese lady about my age moves from station to station helping one and then another child. She seems to be mistress of all the arts, and as we approach, I sense a kind of fey mischief about her.

“In the midst of all this high tech, we need as much high touch as possible,” she says as she extends a paint-streaked hand. I think she is going to shake my hand, but no, she slaps a wad of clay into it. “Make something!” she commands, and I dutifully begin to massage the clay remembering that I haven’t played with clay since I had my Mystery School students model their archetypes in clay. “This is the place where we learn to use all the other parts of our brains. This is where we become Creators!”

Lakshmi takes me over to her own art project, a half-finished sculpture of the hand of David. Her work area is plastered with blowups of details from Michaelangelo’s statue which she studies somewhat querulously. “The problem is,” she admits, “that you can’t just study sculpting and then take a hunk of stone and make a hand. First, you’ve got to get inside the mind of Michaelangelo. Isn’t that so, Keiko?”

Keiko nods.

“And how do you do that?” I ask.

The diminutive art teacher smiles. “You let your mind go idle, breathe yourself into the stone, and then breathe yourself into Michaelangelo’s intention. When you have it, you pick up your tools and begin.”

“Sounds like Zen to me,” I respond.

Keiko winks.

Progressive schools are, perhaps, more alike than they are different. Aside from modeling in clay, the school that I have run for twelve years now in upstate New York has much in common with the Ames, Iowa, grade school of the future. Through the Mystery School bulletin board on the Internet, for example, past, present, and future students work together on projects and breathe electronically into each other’s intentions. But the Mystery School also owes something to the madness and mayhem that characterized my California fourth grade. Fractals quake and snicker from those days to my present life. In some sense, I have never stopped trying to give “the world’s greatest party” and, unlike most politicians, never stopped following through on my campaign promises--get them interested, see the hidden potentials and possibilities in people and events, and turn society upside down, so as to reinvent the world.

I began the Mystery School in 1984, and it has run continuously since then, both in a peaceful mountain setting near Port Jervis, New York, and in branches in the western U.S., Canada, India, and Holland. Mystery School is a community of ordinary, extraordinary people who come together to dream and scheme themselves into their highest human possibility. Nuns and corporate executives, health care professionals and artists, educators and homemakers dance and playact, create art and enact rituals. And

up in front, there I am, still making up games for which only I know the rules, doing tricks designed to shake people out of their ordinary perceptions, telling stories and jokes, and pulling people's Essence out their ears in an on-going theatrical Show-and-Tell. And back in the corner by the ladies room, there are sometimes even a few of the Nasties, still glowering and chanting, "Show-off. Show-off." But this time, they're paying tuition for the privilege.

What is a Mystery School? It is my modern continuation of a community of seekers who have been meeting for millennia, in ancient Greece, Egypt, and Afghanistan; in the kivas of the indigenous peoples of the American southwest; in druid circles in the forests of old Europe. Indeed, I make this connection plain on the opening night of the first weekend in February, when the New York Mystery School begins. Participants, who have committed themselves to attending nine weekend sessions in the course of the year, walk backwards in space and time to be met by the mystery schools of the past. As I call each student's name, I give them the name of an historical mystery school to remember for the year. One student might be charged to hold the energy of the mystery school of the Cathedral of Chartres; another might be given the school of Pythagoras, or of Isis and Osiris, or of the Eleusinian Mysteries.

With that, we plunge into the year's subject matter. Every month we focus on a different aspect of the year's central theme. For example, one year we studied and enacted the stages of the mystic path, using as texts Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* and William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Each step on the mystic path was discussed in my lectures (I write a small book each month in preparation) and was brought to life by literature, music, drama, ritual, and story. Francis of Assisi became the exemplar of the stage of Illumination; Joan of Arc relived for us the stage of Voices and Visions; Don Quixote became the embodiment of the stage of Purification; the ancient texts and legends surrounding the feminine wisdom principle, the Sophia, served to illustrate the Dark Night of the Soul, and so forth. Other years have delved into the world's great myths, spiritual biographies, science fiction and the myths of future times, extraordinary human capacities, and the Mind of the Maker as seen through a study of the world's great creative geniuses.

During the course of a Mystery School session, every sense is engaged; every habit pattern, shaken up. The body is stretched with psychophysical exercises; the alembic of mind, quickened by the essence of ideas from many disciplines. I try to teach the things I love best--history, sacred psychology, music, theater, philosophy, theology, poetry, high and low comedy, the new science, cosmology, metaphysics. All this is larded with processes which engage people in a communal sharing of their own thoughts and life stories. Together they embark on visionary journeys, mythic enactments in which they see their own lives as Life writ large. Participants return year after year for the community such shared work creates; some form transformational friendships, others meet and marry, and virtually all find Mystery School to be the place in which they can finally be what they really are and become what they would be. Mystery School is for many a meta-home away from home.

I created this school principally to help engender a passion of purpose and deep commitment to live truly and beautifully in high service to others. I also wanted to put into practice the truth that I learned from Margaret Mead and from my early schooling--that recognizing people's hidden potentials and involving them in nontraditional teaching-learning communities is the best way to foster personal and social transformation.

We are walking outside, skirting an acre-large map of the state of Iowa laid out on the freshly hoed ground. Children are planting corn, potatoes, wheat, soybeans, and other crops according to areas of the state where they are principally grown. Rivers and lakes are marked by little pools and runways for streams. The perimeter is being planted as a flower and herb garden, and the teacher is showing them how to garden bio-dynamically, so that plants that have a mutual affinity are placed close together.

Nearby is a small barn where children are tending chickens and pigs, and even milking goats. Cheesemaking, I learn, is very big this year. I notice that there are quite a few older people about, in fact some of them are teaching as well as being taught by the children to do certain skills.

Jenny follows my gaze, "Folks of all ages are welcome to come to school here, to teach or learn or both. We even have an After 4 program for people who work. The school programs go on to about midnight, and some children even live here if they need to. We want the children to think of school as an enduring and reliable refuge. In the evening children bring their parents in to learn crafts or do computer work. And remember, this school is in no way isolated. It is hooked in to the local community college, the state university, and many other community organizations, so we are constantly in the process of change in response to the needs of the learners and the community."

"My grandfather is giving a course in Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy here at night," Lakshmi chimes in. "My mother comes too and brings Punjabi snacks for all the students."

"It's a very popular course, except you go to have a lot of water around for people who are not used to the curries," adds Jenny.

Suddenly I note a group of children dressed in buckskins and long calico dresses. We move toward them and watch as they demonstrate a variety of ancient skills--making soap, souring milk, sharpening a knife, and mending clothes. "They just came back from spending a month in the eighteenth century," Tony explains.

"What?" I exclaim. "I knew that schools had progressed, but time travel too?"

"In a way, yes," he laughs. "They go to a special colonial village as part of their internship and learn to live as people did in that time. They get to do all kinds of neat stuff like you see and also live in nature."

"They learn how to do complete processes from beginning to end, just like our ancestors did," Jenny adds. "They learn about the night sky, about living in all kinds of weather, about birth and death, and the means by which that people survive and create their world. We try and let them comprehend from real experience the ways of being human of thousand of years, so that they have real respect and humility for where we've come from and where we may be going."

In addition to challenging me to create my own school, my experiences as a schoolgirl launched me into a long-standing war with the educational status quo. When I began my own research and teaching, I came across too many children who were bright, curious, inventive little folk. . .until they went to school, where their genius was all undone. I sometimes think of traditional schooling as a systematic forgetting of everything that we know that is really important. I am convinced that there is no such thing as a "stupid" child. There are only incredibly stupid and brain diminishing forms of

education. What would happen to society and its citizens if school became a place of discovery and not of diminishment? For that matter, what would happen to the human race if each child was seen as the unique treasure that he or she really is? I received my own revelation about this in my experiences with Billy.

In October, 1970, my husband Bob and I were the subject of a long article in the religion section of Time magazine. A former nun working as a reporter on the magazine came to our Foundation to explore firsthand some of our methods for inducing altered states of consciousness. In her life as a nun, she had longed for but not ever had a mystical experience. Following my instructions during a guided meditation, however, she had a powerful breakthrough, which she wrote about rapturously in the pages of Time.

From that moment on and for about the next four months, we were bombarded by letters, telegrams, and phone calls. We could scarcely leave our building in New York City without being followed and pleaded with to take our pursuer into higher states of consciousness. The funniest call came from a man with a thick Jewish accent who said, "Listen, already. Me you want to work with. I'm a Rabbi, I'm a Zen master, and I'm a Sufi master."

"That's wonderful, sir," I responded. "What is your name?"

"My name is Sam Lewis, but you can call me Master."

Gradually, the calls and letters abated--all but one. A woman in northern Michigan continued to call, write, and send telegrams insisting that I come to Michigan to speak to her Women's Club. She informed me that there was no honorarium available, I would have to pay my own plane fare, and I would have to come on Tuesday, when I was teaching. Intrigued by her chutzpah, I went.

It was clear from my opening remarks, that the ladies of the club had little interest in what I was saying. They listened politely for a while, and then turned their attention to each other and the chicken a la queen and Waldorf salad that adorned their plates. When I finished, there was only the continued mumble of their voices, until one woman clapped slowly and loudly and was eventually joined by a tiny shiver of applause.

"Well, thank you for inviting me; it was most interesting. I haven't had Waldorf salad in ages," I said to my hostess gingerly. "So, as it seems that it's about to snow, I'd better catch the next plane back."

"No, you can't go just yet," she said quickly. Then looking for some explanation she added, "You must come home with me. . . for coffee and cake."

Reluctantly, I followed her home and found myself in her chilly living room. There was a fire burning in the fireplace. I immediately moved over to the couch by the fire.

"No, you can't sit there," she admonished as my bottom descended to the couch. I straightened up, my eyebrows making question marks.

"You must come downstairs to the basement with me."

At that point I knew I was in the middle of an adventure, and as long experience has taught me, when you are in the middle of an adventure, the best thing is just to go along with it. Following her, I descended a nearly vertical set of wooden steps and found myself in a small, cold, darkened basement room.

When the lady turned on the light, however, I was met with wonders that seemed to be a zany

merger of Mad Magazine and Popular Mechanics. The room was filled with crazy inventions of the kind that even my father would have been proud to create. Water ran down a chute, throwing a Ping-Pong ball into a socket, which caused a bell to ring and a miniature pig to spin, which turned an alligator's head into which you stuck your pencil to be sharpened. Other machines did practical things in similarly imaginative ways. There was a shelf holding common looking objects which were captioned to make a mind-boggling difference. Here, for example, was a revolving gold fish bowl for tired goldfish. Some white paste was labeled, "Easy-Off Whisker Remover." Directions written under the caption informed me that a man was to put this paste on his face at night, which would cause his whiskers to grow inward, so that the next morning, he could bite them off. It appeared that Rube Goldberg was alive and well and living in northern Michigan. I noted that a young and very shy boy had followed us down the steps.

I turned to the lady and said, "Now I know why you wanted me to come to Michigan. It wasn't to talk to your club. It was for us to talk about your husband's inventions."

"No, my husband did not invent these," she responded, smiling at the boy.

"You invented them?"

"I would have neither the imagination nor the skill."

"Then who?"

The woman pointed to the boy, "Billy invented and built them all."

"You invented these?"

For an answer he looked down at his shoes and nodded. I turned to his mother, "You must be very happy having such a brilliant child."

"Well, I'm certainly happy, and I'm glad you are. But his teachers are not. Billy is flunking all of his subjects."

"How in the world is that possible?" I exclaimed looking around again at wacky but wonderful examples of the boy's creativity.

"I'm glad you asked that, Dr. Houston," she said with an expression of having led me into the lair of a mystery. "You thought I asked you to come here to speak to my women's club."

"No, Madam," I demurred. "I was beginning to suspect that you did not."

"Well, you're right," she said. "I've been making quite a study of Billy and the way he thinks. I know that there are many children like him who are labeled unintelligent and are made to feel worthless in school. And I know that if we can make the proper scientific studies, there are wonderful things we can do to encourage and develop children like Billy. That's why I invited you here."

"I'm game," I said. "How do we start?"

"Let me show you something," she said, pulling a tape measure, a pad, and a pencil from a drawer. "Now, Billy, you remember how you learned in school last week how to figure out the area of a room?"

"Oh, Ma, do I have to?"

"Yes, Billy. You just go ahead and do it."

I watched as Billy took very careful measurements of the room, and then, already with a sense of defeat, addressed himself to the pad and pencil. He made many erasures, and I think I saw a tear course down his cheek. After a while, he handed his mother his pad with the answer he had so painfully arrived at. According to his calculations, the small basement room was about the size of a football field.

“Well, of course, that’s wrong,” his mother told him.

“Of course,” said Billy.

“Now do it your own way, Billy.”

Billy set to work cheerfully on his task. He looked again at the measurements he had taken, closed his eyes and began to hum to himself, making strange little movements with his hands, as if he were constructing something. His head followed the movements of his hands, and every so often he would open his eyes and jot something down on the pad. Then he would close his eyes again for some more internal business, always matched with snatches of melody and the movement of his hands. Finally, he seemed finished, jotted down his answer, and gave it to his mother. Having worked out the problem myself in the traditional manner, I saw that it was the correct answer. Now I suspected what was going on.

“Billy,” I asked, “what were you doing when you closed your eyes? Were you thinking in pictures?” For years now I had been studying people given to imagistic thinking and had noted that imagery often gave them access to rapid and effective problem solving.

“Yes,” he admitted, “but it’s other stuff too.”

“What kinds of stuff?”

“Well, when I close my eyes to figure something out, it’s like a cross between music and architecture.”

“That does it!” I exclaimed and called up Sister Margaret Mary, head of the philosophy department at Marymount College, where I was then teaching. I told her about Billy and my desire to see if something could be done about him at his school, concluding, “So, Sister, could you please teach my courses in Hegel and Phenomenology, Neoplatonism and Existentialism, and Process Philosophy for the next week?”

“Oh yes, Jean,” she agreed sweetly. “Anything for the greater glory of God.”

It was wonderful teaching in girls’ Catholic colleges in the late sixties and early seventies. Under the inspiration of Vatican II, the nuns had kicked the habit, as it were, and were wide open for new experiences, new ideas, new ways of serving God. On top of this, they were extremely helpful and supportive of my research, bringing theological perspectives to bear upon investigations into the nature of consciousness.

A nearby university had an excellent testing department, and I took Billy there to be given a standard IQ test. He scored 85, which is thought to be below normal intelligence.

“That’s all right, Billy,” I said brightly. “Now let’s just take this test over again, and you do it in your own way.”

“That’s not possible,” he replied.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because, Jean. . . this test is made for people with your kind of mind. It’s not made for people with my kind.”

“You’re right,” I agreed.

All at once I had a great notion. “Never mind, Billy. We’ll go through the test again, and at each question, you tell me how to ask the question.”

“You mean, you’ll ask the questions so I can answer them by doing the special kind of stuff I do in my head?”

“That’s right, Billy. We’ll just have to redesign the test together as we go along.”

And that’s just what we did. He asked if I could turn the first question into music. I tried to comply, singing and dancing and snapping my fingers in some semblance of the question. “I’ve got it,” he said and set to work. He asked if I could turn the second question into something that looked like a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. I did the best I could, shaping the air, mugging, and doing everything but standing on my head. And so the test proceeded, the orthodox statistical psychologist who marked the test looking on with a superior smirk. At the end, when Billy had finished and the test was being marked, I was exhausted, having danced, skipped, sang, emoted, and generally run through the entire canon of human expression. After a short wait, the shocked psychologist came back with the test scored at 135, fifty points higher than Billy’s previous mark. I believe that the score would have been higher still had I been better at asking the questions in an imaginative manner. As I have written of this experience in *The Possible Human*, “Here was a child, deemed below normal by the standard intelligence test, rewriting and reconceptualizing the test and then, more often than not, giving the correct answer to questions where previously he had failed. Even when he scored a wrong answer, his responses were unusually creative, and on some more enlightened test would have been acknowledged for their brilliance and originality.”

The next day, armed with scripture--the IQ score--I visited the principal of the school Billy attended. We also brought along several wagons filled with some of Billy’s inventions. The man who faced me across the desk looked like he had posed for the dour farmer in Grant Wood’s *American Gothic*. Summoning my courage, I trotted out the inventions, showed him the IQ score, and gave a little homily on alternate styles of knowing and learning. The principal stared at me impassively. I tried another tack and addressed the fact that Billy might just be a genius and that the traditional sort of schooling was destroying him and children like him. No reaction. I kept on, scolding, appealing, dragging up to memory every paper I had ever read on the subject. Finally, when I was about to give up, the principal’s face suddenly cracked like a piece of dropped peanut brittle. From the sounds coming out of his mouth, I couldn’t tell whether he was laughing or crying.

“Is something wrong, sir?” I inquired, more than a little shocked by his outburst.

“You bet there is,” he wheezed. “I was a student of the great educator John Dewey back at Columbia Teachers’ College in the twenties. He used to tell us about children like this and the kind of teaching that would help them succeed in school, and I believed him. Wrote a paper on the subject myself, as a matter of fact. But then I bought into the system. Became a superintendent of schools. Did things efficiently. Kept the old ways going. Tried never to rock the boat or put things into the schools that I had studied about with Dewey.” He paused and wiped his eyes. “What the hell. I’m sixty-five years old, and I’m going to retire soon anyway, so let’s do it. Maybe I can do something before I go to justify myself to the memory of my old teacher.”

And with that, he called in Billy’s teachers. “Listen to this lady, and try to do what she says.”

The first thing I did was have Billy show his teachers his inventions (they had never seen them or even known they existed, so private had Billy become about himself at school.) They were bowled over.

“This child, this (in a whisper) backward child, made these things?”

“He’s far from backward,” I answered. “Here, look at his IQ score.”

“IQ score,” they exclaimed. “Then it must be true.”

“Oh, yes,” I said, looking heavenward.

“He thinks in a different way. Here, I’ll show you. Bring me some of the exams he has failed.”

“That’s all of them,” the teachers answered.

“Well, just bring me a few, then.” They did, and Billy and I redesigned the exams in on the spot, with the result that he scored a passing grade in each. When the teachers were properly astonished, I asked them to stay after school for the next week so that we could work together to discover ways of helping Billy and children like him learn.

Suddenly Billy interrupted, “Could I bring in Sally? Could I bring in George? I think that they think the same way I do.”

Four of the teachers agreed to be part of the study. One refused, saying that he had never learned of this sort of thing in teachers’ college, and it was so much baloney and probably against the teachings of his church.

The next week taught us all more about education than we had ever known, as the children helped us figure out ways of presenting information and questions so that they could respond from varying arenas of their minds. I remember George saying to the history teacher, “Mr. Hayden, when you tell us about George Washington crossing the Delaware and you drop in all those facts, I can’t remember them. So why can’t you make it like Star Trek?”

“What do you mean?” Hayden asked.

“Well, why not have us close our eyes and picture George Washington crossing the Delaware while you drop in the date and then I think I’ll be able to remember it.”

“Why, yes,” said the teacher. “I think I can do that.”

“But, Mr. Hayden,” George persisted. “Why does George Washington have to cross the Delaware anyway?”

“Because he did.”

“No,” the boy continued, “why not have him drown, and then let us figure out what would have happened to American history if George Washington had died?”

“Well. . .yes . . .that’s an awfully interesting way of presenting history, George. We’ll try it. . .the invention of alternatives in history. A fine idea.”

Just then, emboldened by George’s foray into changing the nature of teaching methodology, Sally addressed the math teacher, “Mrs. Shumacher, I hate math. I throw up before every exam. And I was thinking, what if you made me queen of the planet of Math. Then all the figures and numbers would be my subjects, and they would show me how things work on my planet. And because I was their queen, they would love me. And if they loved me, then I would love them, and then I wouldn’t hate math anymore.”

It was all I could do to contain myself. This child was presenting one of the most profound ideas in educational psychology--lift a learning block by replacing it with a more powerful emotional construct. Hot dog!

Together with the children, we explored other ways of learning, the children teaching us much more than we taught them. I followed Billy's progress over the years and was gratified by the way that he came out of himself and became more involved with school and friends. He continued to develop his crazy inventions but soon added more "useful" inventions as well.

What was surprising, however, was that throughout most of his junior high and high school, as well as his college career, he rarely got above a B or a B minus average. Only when he went to graduate school in design engineering did he do well, graduating summa cum laude. Years later, when I asked him to explain this conundrum, he said, "Well, Jean, so many of the tests had multiple choice questions. You know, answer either a or b or c or d. I couldn't help myself, Jean. I would often see a more complex and interesting possibility and would put it down as e, and the teachers would sigh and mark me down."

Billy's case is legion, and there are many people reading this book who might themselves be Billy's or have children or know of ones who are. He is an extreme example, of course, for by the age of twelve, he was a highly developed visual thinker. But there are so many children whose natural dominance is toward visual or kinesthetic or even auditory dominance and who are penalized as a result. How many thinkers and creative spirits are wasted, how much brain and emotional and even spiritual power goes down the drain because of our archaic and insular notions of education?

By 1972, inspired by this and similar incidents, I was working with schools all over America to put art back into the curriculum and to develop teaching and learning strategies that allowed for many different kinds of learning so that no child would be left out. At the Mead School in Byram, New York, I worked with its founder, Dr. Elaine de Beauport, to develop a curriculum in which art was central to the learning process; in fact the open art center was the first thing that everyone saw upon entering the school building. Each child spent hours each week in the art center, learning painting, sculpture, design, book making, batik, collage, montage, weaving, and other artistic forms, encouraged to discover their own creativity as they developed their skills and know-how. Through this emphasis on art, children not only learned how to do entire processes, developed fine eye to motor skills, and became natural artists, but they also employed these same skills in learning mathematics through music and rhythm, science through sensory feeling, and chemistry through the creation of batiks and collages. Thus even "regular" subjects employed artistic means to amplify the learning process.

Students made covenants to gain mastery of specific subject matter each term--in math, reading, geography, ecology, or history. And in virtually every case, they did so, for learning had become freedom, joy, and the unfolding of who and what they were. Equally important to the success of the school, teachers and parents joined together in an on-going learning process with the children, breaking down the sharp divisions between home and school, the teacher and the taught. As a result of these innovations, few if any children failed in this school, and when they took the standard tests, they scored much higher than many in traditional schools. The Mead School remains one of the great educational experiments in America and is still producing wonderfully creative and resourceful children who, together with their teachers and parents, form one of the best continuing teaching-learning communities in America.

I have tried to bring this model to schools throughout the world with varying success. In Asian countries which were once part of the Raj, one first has to lift the prison gates of nineteenth-century

British education (which the Brits themselves have long abandoned). I have tried to convince both teachers and government administrators that the old medium is no longer adequate to the new messages beaming at us from the world and time. At the cusp of the millennium, we can no longer be educated for the year 1926 or earlier. Yes, we must continue to learn to read and write and cipher, but we also need to embrace an education for liberating the ability to imagine, to dream, and to expand the limits of the possible. We require education at its edges, education that guides us through the munificence of our capacities and inspires us to become stewards of this most critical time in human history. My life has been a search for the education that would nurture this goal and make it happen. Perhaps I will find it in the future.

We are coming to the end of our tour.

“There is one more room we need to show you, Granny Jean. It is our most special room.”

“What’s in it?”

“We can’t tell you. You have to discover it for yourself.”

The children lead me to the mud and wattle hut. Above the entrance is a sign: THE BILLY ROOM. I enter alone, and what I see so astonishes me that. . .I enroll as a student in the school.